

from it. But again, that does not mean anything unless it is made concrete, and here again an enormous field of invention opens for the activity of revolutionaries.

**Note**

- 1 *Telos* translator's note: *Si le grain ne meurt* . . . is the title of an autobiographical work by André Gide and is taken from John 12: 24: 'but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit'.

**Presentation of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.  
An Organ of Critique and Revolutionary  
Orientation (1949)\***

The group whose organ this Review is was set up inside the French section of the 'Fourth International' in 1946. As it developed politically and ideologically, it became increasingly distanced from the latter, and this led it to break decisively not only with the present positions of Trotsky's epigones but with what has constituted the genuine essence of Trotskyism since 1923, that is to say, its reformist attitude toward the Stalinist bureaucracy (in the profound sense of the term 'reformist'), an attitude which has strangely been combined with an attempt to maintain intact, within a reality that has constantly been evolving, the basic tenets of Bolshevik policy during its heroic period.

It is not by accident that our group was formed inside the Trotskyist organization. Indeed, even a passing awareness of the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism leads, most often, to Trotskyism. But it is not an accident that we have separated ourselves from it, for the question of the nature of Stalinism is precisely the point on which the superficiality of the Trotskyist conceptions becomes most apparent.

Indeed, our positions were formed on the basis of a problem that all revolutionary militants feel is the fundamental problem of our time: the nature of the 'working-class' bureaucracy and especially of the Stalinist bureaucracy. We began, as all workers who have simply gone beyond Stalinism do, by asking ourselves: What is Russia today, what are the 'Communist' parties? What do the politics and ideology of Stalinism signify? What are the social bases? And, finally, what are the economic roots? This bureaucracy, which for twenty-five years has dominated Russian society, which since the end of the war has annexed the eastern half of Europe, and which is now in the process of conquering China at the same time as it is maintaining exclusive influence over key sections of the proletariat in the bourgeois countries – is it a mere temporary excrescence grafted onto the workers' movement, a simple historical accident, or does it correspond to

\* 'Présentation', *S. ou B.*, 1 (March 1949). Reprinted in *SB 1*, pp. 131–7, and in *SB\**, pp. 106–10.

deep-seated characteristics in the evolution of contemporary social and economic life? If it is the latter that is the true response to this question, if to speak of a 'historical accident' apropos of a phenomenon so vast and so enduring is quite simply ridiculous, the question then arises: How is it that this evolution of economic and social life, which according to Marxism ought to lead to the victory of the revolution, has led to the victory, even fleeting, of the bureaucracy? And what, from this perspective, becomes of the proletarian revolution?

It was, therefore, the most practical and immediate necessities of class struggle that led us to pose seriously the problem of bureaucracy and that in turn obliged us to pose anew the problem of the evolution of the modern economy, of the signification of a century of proletarian struggles, and, in the end, of the revolutionary outlook itself. A theoretical elaboration taking practical preoccupations as its point of departure once again became the prerequisite for any coherent, organized activity.

In introducing ourselves today, via this Review, to the avant-garde of manual and intellectual workers, we know ourselves to be the only ones who are responding in a systematic way to the fundamental problems of the contemporary revolutionary movement: we think we are the only ones who are resuming and continuing the Marxist analysis of the modern economy, who are posing on a scientific basis the problem of the historical development of the workers' movement and of its signification, who are providing a definition of Stalinism and, in general, of the 'working-class' bureaucracy, who are furnishing a characterization of the Third World War, who are finally once again laying down what is involved in the revolutionary outlook while also taking account of the original elements being created by our age. In questions of such breadth, there can be no question of either pride or modesty. Marxists have always deemed that, in representing the historical interests of the proletariat – the sole positive class in present-day society – they were able to have a view on reality that is infinitely superior to that of everyone else, whether in comparison to the capitalists or to all intermediate varieties of bastards. We think that we represent the living continuation of Marxism within society today. In this sense, we are in no way afraid of being confused with publishers of 'Marxist' reviews, 'clarifiers', 'men of good will', quibblers and gossipers of all sorts. If we pose problems, it is that we think we can resolve them.

The famous saying, 'Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary action', really has to be comprehended in its full breadth and in its true meaning. The proletarian movement distinguishes itself from all previous political movements, however important the latter might have been, by this, that it is the first to be conscious of its objectives and of its means. In this sense, not only is theoretical elaboration for it inseparable from this activity, but this theoretical elaboration neither precedes nor follows revolutionary

activity: it is simultaneous with the latter and each conditions the other. Separated from practice, from its preoccupations and from its control, attempts at theoretical elaboration cannot but be vain, sterile, and increasingly meaningless. Conversely, practical activity that does not base itself on constant research can lead only to a cretinized form of empiricism. 'Revolutionary' bonesetters are no less dangerous than other sorts of medical hacks.

But what is this revolutionary theory on which action must constantly base itself? Is it a dogma, plucked fully armed from the head of Marx or some other modern prophet, whose original splendour the rest of us would be charged only with maintaining in mint condition? To ask the question is to answer it. To say 'Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary action' while understanding by 'theory' mere knowledge of Marxism and at the very most a scholastic exegesis of the classic texts is a pathetic joke expressing nothing but impotence. Revolutionary theory can be of value only if it is constantly being developed, only if it is enriched by all the conquests of scientific thought and of human thought in general, by the experience of the revolutionary movement more particularly, only if it undergoes, each time it proves necessary, all the modifications and internal revolutions reality imposes upon it. The classic saying therefore has meaning only if it is understood to be saying, 'Without *development* of revolutionary theory, no development of revolutionary action.'

By stating things in this way, we have already said that, while we consider ourselves to be Marxists, we in no way think that being Marxist signifies doing in relation to Marx what Catholic theologians do in relation to the Holy Scriptures. Being Marxist signifies for us situating oneself on the terrain of a tradition, posing problems starting at the point Marx and his continuators posed them, maintaining and defending traditional Marxist positions so long as a new examination has not persuaded us that these positions must be abandoned, amending them or replacing them by others that better correspond to subsequent experience and to the needs of the revolutionary movement.

All this does not signify merely that the development and propagation of revolutionary theory are already extremely important practical activities – which is correct, but insufficient. It signifies, above all, that without a renewal of the fundamental conceptions there will be no practical renewal. The reconstitution of the revolutionary movement will necessarily have to pass through a period during which the new conceptions will need to become the possession of the majority of the [working] class. This will take place through two processes that are independent of each other only in appearance: on the one hand, the mass will have to raise itself up, under pressure of objective conditions and of the necessities of its struggle, to a clear awareness, even if this awareness is rough and simple; on the other, the seeds of

revolutionary organization, such as our own group, will have to, starting upon a firm theoretical basis, spread this new conception of the problems at hand and give it ever more concrete form. The meeting point of these two processes, the moment when the majority of the class raises itself up to a clear understanding of the historical situation and when the general theoretical conception of the movement can be expressed fully in directives for practical action, is the moment of Revolution.

It is obvious that the present-day situation is still far removed from that point. Both in France and in other countries, the majority of the proletariat is alienated and mystified by its bureaucracy. It is mystified ideologically when it adopts, either as its own interest or as a 'lesser evil', the bureaucracy's policy, whether this bureaucracy be 'reformist' or Stalinist; its very action is alienated, since the struggles it undertakes to defend its immediate interests are most often, and as soon as they take on a certain breadth, appropriated by the Stalinist bureaucracy as an instrument of its own national and international policy. Finally, the elements of the avant-garde that are now attaining awareness of this mystification and this alienation draw from it, for the moment and for lack of a general outlook, only a negative conclusion directed against the bureaucratic organizations; while this conclusion is well founded, it is evidently still inadequate. Under these conditions it is obvious that a correct general conception cannot in the present period be expressed at every moment by slogans for immediate action leading to revolution. To say that we support unconditionally every proletarian struggle, that we are on the side of the workers at each moment they struggle to defend their interests, even if we are in disagreement over the definition of the objectives and of the means of struggle, is an elementary truth that goes without saying. But to want, apropos of every partial struggle, to give oneself over to superficial and sterile agitation for the General Strike or for the Revolution, despite all reality and all evidence, is a task we want nothing to do with.

As appropriate as they are, these remarks nevertheless neither exhaust nor resolve the problem of the necessary connection between a general conception of the problems of the revolution on the one hand and present-day struggle on the other. These struggles are not only an extremely important material for analysis and verification; furthermore, and above all, they are the setting in which a real proletarian avant-garde, however numerically restricted it may be, can form and educate itself. On the other hand, a general conception has some value only to the extent that it proves capable of affecting a portion of the avant-garde of the working class and to the extent that it offers the framework, even if only a general one, for practical solutions, in other words, useful criteria for action. It is in terms of all these factors that we can define the immediate objective of this Review as being the popularization, to the greatest extent possible, of our theoretical and

political conceptions, the discussion and clarification of the practical problems the struggle between classes constantly poses, even under the crippled forms this struggle presently takes.

We therefore constantly seek all occasions to deal with the practical questions of the day, even when these questions affect only one sector of the class; we shall avoid dealing with theoretical questions for their own sake. Our goal will be to provide working tools to the advanced workers in an age when the complexity of the problems, the confusion that reigns everywhere, and the constant effort of the capitalists and especially the Stalinists to mystify everyone apropos of everything necessitate an unprecedented effort in this direction. In treating these problems we shall always try not only to present them in the clearest language possible but especially to show their practical importance and the concrete conclusions that follow therefrom.

This Review is in no way an organ for the confrontation of opinions between people who 'pose problems' but, rather, the instrument for the expression of an overall conception which we believe to be systematic and coherent. The main lines of this conception are expressed in the article 'Socialisme ou Barbarie', contained in this first issue.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, neither on the organizational level nor on the theoretical level are we partisans of monolithism. We think that the development of revolutionary theory can occur only through the confrontation of divergent opinions and positions. We think, too, that this discussion must be carried out before the whole of the class; we think, quite specifically, that the conception according to which one party alone possesses the truth and the whole truth, and brings it to the class while hiding from the class its internal disagreements is, on the ideological plane, one of the roots as well as one of the most important expressions of bureaucratism in the workers' movement. This is why the divergencies that might appear on particular points among the comrades of our group will be able to be expressed in the Review, and the Review will note which articles express the position of their author and not of the group as such. Discussion will therefore be free within the framework of our general conceptions, our constant concern being to avoid having this discussion become an interminable dialogue between a few individuals.

We are certain that the workers and the intellectuals who, in France, have already become aware of the importance of the problems we are posing, who understand how urgent it is to give them an adequate response, one in conformity with the interests of the masses, will support us in the long and difficult effort the preparation and dissemination of our Review will represent.

#### Note

1. T/E: See *SB* (1949).